

THE REIGN OF THE VIGILANCE COMMITTEE

At Baxter Springs, Kan., Winter of 1866 and 1867.

By ROBERT MORRIS PECK, Alias "Number 27."
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"Respectable" Citizens Trapped.

The bait caught them, and as there was no one else near they soon began talking more excitedly and loudly enough for me to hear them distinctly, but as they seemed to have about finished their consultation I only heard a few concluding words. These, however, were such as to excite intense interest in my mind. Stanley was saying, with many oaths and animated gestures, as they rose to their feet to move away: "Well go out and get Calaham and a few others that can be depended on and I'll get on my horse and hurry across the river and gather up a few more there that I know I can rely on, while you and Callahan and Powell delay the execution some way till I get back, and then we'll get around Mizer and take him away from them and defy them."

With this they hurried out of the house. As soon as they were gone I went to Willard, the President of the committee, and told him what I had heard. He said:

"Well, we must hurry up and head them off, arrest and hold them awhile to keep them out of mischief. Where do you think we'll be most likely to find them?"

"At Callahan's," I replied.

"Come on," said he, making for the door, and as we passed out, seeing Higginbotham near, he called to him: "Hig, come with us."

The three of us struck out for Callahan's house, which was in the public square, and on nearing it I noticed some dark objects standing a little way off in a fence corner, and whispered to the other men:

"Here they are, I believe."

Turning and walking briskly up to them, with our pistols drawn, we easily recognized them as the men we were after, and Willard called out:

"Throw up your hands!"

"Which they did, not without an indignant protest from Stanley, however, who demanded to know as we disarmed them:

"By what authority do you arrest and disarm respectable citizens?"

Willard answered him, showing his revolver: "This is authority enough for the present. I understand you fellows are plotting mischief, and I thought I'd better put you where you can do no harm for awhile."

We marched them back to the court room, and placed them under guard among some other prisoners, cautioning them that if they did not conduct themselves discreetly they might find themselves "looking up a limb," like their deceased friends, the late Mizer boys. This was only said as a bluff, for we had no intention to do them further harm than to keep them from attempting to rescue George Mizer, but they took it in earnest, and seemed to be very uneasy and also very humble and docile, denying all intention of opposing the committee or trying to rescue Mizer.

Safely Under Guard.

After seeing Mann, Stanley and Callahan safely under guard, as it was then after midnight, I went home and to bed.

It had got to be the fashion with many people of the town of mornings on getting up to take a look at the old elm to see whether it had borne any more of its gruesome "fruit" during the night, and on the next morning after the above-mentioned occurrences, as we looked in that direction a major body was seen swinging in the wintry wind under the gallows limb of the old tree, which on closer inspection proved to be what was left of George Mizer.

The bodies of his brothers had been taken down the day previous, and I think, were turned over to some of their relatives, who came with a team and took them away; but it is my impression that the body of Geo. Mizer was not called for, and was buried by the committee a little way from the old elm.

As we had no further designs on the three men, Mann, Stanley and Callahan, that we had arrested the previous night, they were accordingly released in the morning, with an admonition to "look a little out" for we would have a watchful eye on them in future.

Shortly after breakfast that morning Stanley happened to meet Willard on the street, and after a short exchange of compliments they were to pursue each other—a style of fighting rather uncommon in our community. Willard had his revolver belted on him, but as Stanley's gun had not been returned to him since he was released, the vigilant man disdained to take any advantage of Stanley, so they went at it with their fists. Willard, careless as to the result of his fight, was not hampered by prize-fighting rules, but took it rough-and-tumble.

All the while on the street quickly gathered around the two combatants, and I noticed during their first clinch that Stanley was trying to reach Willard's gun. To keep Stanley from this, a cowardly advantage of an honorable foe who had just refused to take the same advantage of him, I stepped up behind Willard and jerked his pistol out of the scabbard, and stood by with it in my hand.

Stanley was a large, long-armed, raw-boned, muscular man, while Willard was much smaller, but compact and "pony built." At arms' length the big fellow had all the advantage, and thumped Willard severely, but the smaller man had a trick of striking and kicking at the same time that doubled Stanley up like a jack-knife. At one of these kicking exploits, one Winchester, a henchman of the vigilantes, who his boss was about knocked out, rushed up as the two men were fighting, and taking a serious look into the muzzle of

the pistol I held in my hand he seemed to change his mind suddenly and backed out, for I assured him that I was unpinned the game, and his friend should have fair play, but I'd stand none of his interference. So the punching went merrily on.

It was my private opinion about this stage of the game that Willard was getting badly beaten; but it was a falling of his that he never knew when he was whipped, and seeing the disadvantage he was laboring under, he rushed in, clinched Stanley and threw him.

It took the big fellow but a second or two to discover when he fell with Willard on top of him that he was whipped, for he yelled lustily: "Whoop! Take him off!"

"Save Your Day."

Being the only one in the crowd that had a drawn revolver, I seemed to have the drop on the rest of the onlookers, and they all seemed by mutual consent to acknowledge my authority, and looked at me hesitatingly before offering to separate the combatants.

Willard was now getting in his work on Stanley in great shape, and seeing the hesitation of the bystanders, the big fellow roared again: "For God's sake, men, take him off! Are you going to stand there and see him murder me? He's crippled me for life now!"

I then gave the word to "pull him off," and it took pulling to make Willard loosen his hold. We took him into McMillan's Store (at whose door the

fight had occurred) to repair damages, while Calaham, who was with some of his friends, fully satisfied that he had had enough, (Capt. Mann and Stanley about a year later brought suit for damages for false arrest and imprisonment, against Willard, Higginbotham and a third man (myself), whom they could not remember, but when I was put on the witness stand the attorney, Judge Webb, of Fort Scott, drew from me the fact that I was one of the arresting party—that third man. They were satisfied, however, and had the costs to pay.)

The next man brought before the committee for trial was one John German, who had been arrested on his claim, about 16 miles up Spring River, where he was living with his family.

The evidence in German's case showed that he was a member of the gang of outlaws, that his house was a common rendezvous for members of the fraternity; that he had been active in concealing and running off stolen stock, and had assisted in butchering some stolen cattle, and had probably been engaged in a case or two of robbery, but it was not conclusively proven that he had participated in any murders.

Men whose lives have been in jeopardy under similar circumstances, and from the same source of danger will have a sympathetic feeling for each other, but there may be no other bond of fellowship between them.

I was convinced that this fellow, German, was a dangerous man, and cattle stealing was considered a capital crime by a majority of the Vigilance Committee. He probably deserved hanging, according to our code, but there was a serious doubt in the minds of some of the committee as to the propriety of inflicting the death penalty for any other crime but murder. Two of this persuasion, as was also our President, Albert Willard, and some other prominent vigilantes, while there were many who advocated hanging any man convicted of horse or cattle stealing or for even being a member of the gang of outlaws. The evidence had shown that German had been suspiciously connected with a certain murder, but the proof was not conclusive.

Civil War Prison Companions.

German and I had been, on an occasion during the last year of the civil war, prisoners in the hands of the same

band of rebel bushwhackers, the strangers to each other at the time, and had each, at a slightly different time and place, while we were helpless, unarmed prisoners, seen a number of our less fortunate comrades being thrown down in a heartless manner by our inhuman captors after they (these prisoners) had surrendered their arms under a promise that their lives should be spared, and that they should be treated and respected as prisoners of war. Both German and I had by a mere chance escaped the fate of our murdered comrades, the bushwhackers had originally intended to kill all their prisoners, and when he and I met by chance soon afterwards in Fort Scott and exchanged accounts of one of the most strenuous days either of us had ever experienced we found that we had both been prisoners to a gang of murderous wretches, who boasted that no Union man had ever fallen into their hands and got away alive—that they made it an inviolable rule to kill all the prisoners they took. We had each escaped the fate intended for us in thrilling but different ways.

Having thus been chance comrades in like misfortune and good luck, I had felt a very natural sympathy for the fellow, and had met him and talked over those exciting times occasionally since coming to Baxter Springs before I had had any suspicion that he belonged to the gang of outlaws.

I now felt particularly sorry for him, and as there was a doubt in my mind of his having committed a crime meriting hanging, I believed that his was a case where clemency might with propriety be extended to the prisoner.

When he had been brought in a prisoner and had heard of the fate that overtook the Mizer boys he seemed to realize the danger he was in, and appealed to me for help, begging me in consideration of his wife and children to use my influence to get him released, promising to leave the country and reform if permitted to do so.

I made him no positive promise, but told him I would listen to the evidence, and if he was not proved to have committed murder I might be able to help him, for I knew there were a number of the vigilantes who did not favor hanging for a less crime.

I had made no appeal to the committee in his behalf, as the case did not seem closed at supper time, and had gone to my supper, supposing that further testimony would be heard afterwards that might convict him beyond the chance of my help.

German Suspiciously Missing.

On returning to the court room after dark, I looked to see if there were any fresh arrivals of prisoners, and in so doing noticed with surprise that German was not in the room. A suspicion flashed into my mind that he might have been taken out and strung up. I hurried to Willard, and demanded anxiously:

"Willard, where's German?"

"Don't know," he answered in a non-committal sort of a way that assured me that he did not.

"Yes, you do know," I replied. "Tell me, have they taken him down to the tree?"

"I expect they have; I don't see him around here," he said, casting a glance around the room.

"Well, Willard," I returned, "I have listened to your testimony in German's case, and I don't believe the evidence will justify us in hanging him, and I'm decidedly opposed to it."

"Well, Peck," said Willard, "since you think that way I'll admit that I've had my doubts about it, too, and if it ain't too late we'll stop proceedings in his case till further orders. You take Higginbotham there and run down the tree, and if they haven't already swung him off before you get there tell the hangmen that I order German to be returned here and remain in the custody of the guards at the court room. Strike a trot now or you may be too late. If they have already swung him up, why, you'll best be nothing about it, and we'll try and even up the account by turning the next one loose. I want to do the square thing all around, you know. Hurry now, now!"

(To be continued.)

St. Cloud Locals.

Comrade and Mrs. C. C. Clausen arrived on Monday last from Chicago, Ill. Comrade Clausen is a property owner here, and will remain for the winter at least. He was a member of Co. B, 82d Ill., was taken a prisoner of war at Gettysburg on July 1, 1863, and paroled at Richmond Aug. 27 of that year.

Comrade J. M. Randall and wife, of Gering, Neb., arrived here Saturday last, and are stopping at the Fleminghurst. Comrade Randall participated with Co. I, 36th Wis., in the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, Cold Harbor, Va., and others, and was slightly wounded. He owns property here and will build, being much pleased with St. Cloud.

Comrade C. B. Hughes and wife, of Rio Grande, N. M., arrived Thursday morning. Comrade Hughes is a property holder here, and will remain in Co. F, 32d Ohio, and later in Co. A, 173d Ohio. Both he and Mrs. Hughes are very favorably impressed with St. Cloud, and are looking forward to the future of the town. Strangers coming to St. Cloud are impressed with the wonderful growth of the colony, and the manifest contentment of the people. The climate is as fine as any on earth. There are no swamps or alligators, as so many people imagine. All St. Cloud asks is that people come and see for themselves. Yours, sincerely, Loretta Garner, Press Correspondent, W. R. C., St. Cloud, Fla., Oct. 3, 1910.

The Son of a Veteran Pleas.

Editor National Tribune: I wish as the son of a veteran to say that I think The National Tribune and the Seminole Land and Investment Co. have done a noble thing in building up this colony, and they are still extending their money here. I have been here a year, and I like it. I have seen the land, and it is a beautiful place. I have seen the people, and they are a fine lot. I have seen the future of this colony, and it is a bright one. I have seen the growth of this colony, and it is a wonderful one. I have seen the contentment of the people, and it is a manifest one. I have seen the climate, and it is as fine as any on earth. I have seen the absence of swamps and alligators, as so many people imagine. I have seen the people, and they are a fine lot. I have seen the future of this colony, and it is a bright one. I have seen the growth of this colony, and it is a wonderful one. I have seen the contentment of the people, and it is a manifest one. 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